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STATUS OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV)

[17 January 1991]

THE CHILD IN ARMED CONFLICTS

1. On the occasion of the first anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly, on 20 November 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Federation Terre des Hommes (FITDH) sent out the following appeal to all the Member Governments of the United Nations as a contribution to promoting this Convention, of crucial importance to the fate of children. This appeal on the theme of the child in armed conflicts, which is more relevant than ever to the present situation, has been co-signed by 15 non-governmental organizations 1/.

"THE FITDH,

Convinced that the child represents the future of humanity; that any brutal treatment inflicted upon children, individually or collectively, adversely affects the future of their society; that for one who has known only violence, the faculty of adaptation to peace and social solidarity will be impaired in adulthood; and that disorders and armed conflicts rob children of their most precious years of play and physical, psychical, intellectual and social development,

Noting that the civilian population, consisting largely of children in the present regions of conflict, is affected far more than in the past by the techniques, strategies and social costs of modern wars, and that up to 80 per cent of the victims claimed by certain conflicts are civilians, while fighting often extends into the heart of populated areas,

Alarmed at the large number of children who, because of these modern strategies, are hurt by adults' conflicts and have to endure the death of their nearest relations or separation from them, the destruction of the familial, social and environmental structure, forcible displacement, detention, physical and psychical wounds, and deprivation of care, food and education, and, since hundreds of thousands of them are compelled to carry arms, risk their lives while often acting without cognizance,

Recognizing the utility and value of a strict application of the international instruments concerning human rights, as also of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the 1977 Protocols additional thereto, 25 articles of which accord special protection to children in armed conflict situations, while many other provisions afford protection to civilians against the effects of hostilities,

Recalling that, according to the actual wording of Protocol I, the right to choose methods or means of warfare is not unlimited and that attacks against the civilian population and attacks producing indiscriminate effects are prohibited,

Recalling also that the unity of the family is an objective of humanitarian international law and that children must have the benefit of an environment as close as possible to the one they are used to,

Encouraged, lastly, by the present climate of dialogue and abatement of conflicts between the major powers and by the progress in democratization affecting a number of nations.

Urges all the States concerned:

1. To strive for peaceful settlement of conflicts as a priority objective, to continue every disarmament effort already undertaken, to explore actively every new opportunity for reduction of armaments while aiming at their eventual abolition, and to devote a large part of the sums thus released to a social policy and to the putting into effect of all the rights of the child;

2. To become parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the 1977 Protocols additional thereto, to make the declaration stipulated in article 90 of Protocol I and to put into effect the provisions contained in these instruments by adopting the measures necessary for that purpose;

3. To establish, whenever they are involved in an armed conflict, safety zones and/or neutralized zones according to the provisions of the fourth Geneva Convention (as was done by the belligerents in the Falklands (Malvinas) War, in order to shelter from the fighting vulnerable persons and the civilian population;

4. To afford to children, whether they be prisoners of war or detained in any way or at any place whatsoever on account of a conflict, all the protection to which they are entitled under humanitarian international law, giving priority to repatriation of child prisoners of war in case of an exchange or a unilateral release, and taking all necessary measures to ensure that children who have taken part in, or suffered in any way from hostilities are speedily reintegrated and readjusted to normal living with their families;

5. To safeguard the unity of the family in all circumstances, to facilitate its reunification and to co-operate with all the international organizations concerned to provide for the education and protection of unaccompanied, orphaned or refugee children;

6. To favour all forms of civilian national service and to include, during existing periods of military national service or in the training of police forces, comprehensive programmes of instruction in humanitarian international law, with practical exercises, this facility also being extended to the population at large."

2. The above appeal was accompanied by a file that was addressed to the international press. This file, which can be consulted, contains four information sheets each dealing with a theme concerning the child in armed conflicts.

3. The first information sheet, entitled: "The effects of the war in Lebanon on the schooling of children", shows that armed conflicts jeopardize children's schooling and thereby all their future activities. School buildings are destroyed or occupied by refugees, a climate of mistrust sets in among the children, the way to school is beset with dangers, and learning materials and even simply sending children to school become prohibitively expensive for many families reduced to destitution by the war.

4. The second information sheet (in two parts) is entitled: "Mental health disorders in child victims of war". It shows that war constitutes a major risk factor for children's emotional development. Armed conflict provokes in them behavioural disorders, sleep disturbances, learning difficulties and terrors. Moreover, war children experience difficulty in turning into peace children, which may contribute to prolonging conflicts. It is possible to remedy this situation and members of FITDH are backing several projects aimed at mitigating the difficulties experienced by children who have been victims of armed conflict, in particular in the Philippines, Nicaragua and Mozambique.

5. The third information sheet, entitled: "Children under the yoke of debt", shows that despite the crisis of indebtedness, military expenditure has risen considerably in the developing countries. For example, it increased more than sixfold between 1960 and 1986. In some of the poorest countries the military budget is three times as high as the budgets for education and health combined. It is, of course, the children who are the primary victims of this state of affairs.

6. The last information sheet, entitled: "Arms trade and development", shows that an increase in military expenditure with a view to acquiring higher-performance equipment encourages resort to force for settling conflicts instead of negotiation and that human rights violations in societies armed to excess stifle many initiatives for development.

Note

1/ ICCB, International Institute of Humanitarian Law, LIDLIP, World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Professions, WFUNA, International Catholic Migration Commission, International Federation of Social Workers, International Federation of Women Lawyers, Pax Romana-ICMICA/IMCS, IADL, DCI, World Federation of Methodist Women, International Save the Children Alliance, World Organization against Torture, Oxfam (UK and Ireland).